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Freedom Industries execs are longtime colleagues

by David Gutman

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — Freedom Industries, the company whose chemical spill is responsible for the contamination of much of the Kanawha Valley's water, has existed in its current form for less than two weeks.

On the last day of 2013, Freedom Industries, which distributes chemicals used in coal mining, merged with three other companies: Etowah River Terminal, Poca Blending and Crete Technologies, a Delaware company.

Poca Blending, in Nitro, and Etowah River Terminal, in Charleston, now compose the two branches of Freedom Industries.

The company's website says the Charleston branch, which spilled the chemical, "can process large volumes of chemical rapidly, and cost effectively."

Smells from the spill were reported early Thursday morning, but Freedom mostly stonewalled media inquiries — releasing only a bland news release through a public relations firm — until a 10-minute news conference Friday evening.

At the news conference, Freedom Industries President Gary Southern gave few details about the company, made several statements seemingly in conflict with what government officials have said, and was whisked away by a public relations handler with reporters still shouting questions.

Prior to the news conference, the most extensive public statement from anyone connected with the company came Friday afternoon from Kathy Stover-Kennedy, the girlfriend of Freedom Industries executive Dennis P. Farrell.

Stover-Kennedy stressed that the spill was an accident and said that Farrell has received threatening and frightening messages from people around the world.

"I'm not asking for anyone's sympathy but a little empathy wouldn't hurt. And just so you know, the boys at the plant made and drank coffee this morning! I showered and brushed my teeth this morning and I am just fine!" Stover-Kennedy wrote on her personal Facebook page.

"There has been criticism from many about how Freedom Industries is handling this," she continued. "Denny is not a spokesperson and has no desire to be. His expertise was much needed elsewhere. If he had taken the time to talk to the numerous media networks, giving statements, he would not have been able to react to the situation and perform his job accordingly. It wasn't his decision to hire a spokesperson and it isn't his job to be one."

Details are still scant about Farrell and the company's two founders, but some details about the men, Southern and Carl L. Kennedy II, are known.

Freedom Industries was founded in 1992 by Southern and Kennedy, according to filings with the West Virginia secretary of state.

Kennedy is still listed as "incorporator" on the secretary of state's website, but a woman who answered the phone at Freedom Industries said he left the company "years ago."

In 2005, federal prosecutors charged Kennedy with failing to pay more than \$200,000 in income taxes, according to reports at the time. In 1987, he pleaded guilty to selling between 10 and 12 ounces of cocaine, according to reports.

Kennedy grew up in Montgomery and went to college there at the former West Virginia Institute of Technology, where he met Farrell, according to the reports.

Farrell is listed as Freedom Industries' president on the company's website, although he does not appear on the secretary of state filing and a woman who answered the phone at would call him only an executive.

Kennedy and Farrell became friends and eventually went into business together. In 2002, they opened a sports bar in Montgomery called The Bank Bar and Grill.

They also owned two buildings at the corner of Virginia and Capitol streets in downtown Charleston.

The secretary of state lists Farrell as the "organizer" of Etowah River Terminal, a chemical storage facility, which was founded in 2001.

It failed to file an annual report in 2005 and had its business license revoked, but re-formed in 2011.

No one answered the phone at Etowah, but its website lists its location as and shows pictures of the current site of Freedom Industries.

The site, just a few feet from the Elk River, has 13 bulk tanks and a total liquid storage capacity of 4 million gallons, according to the Etowah website.

Etowah's business license was terminated when it merged with Freedom Industries on Dec. 31 of last year.

It appears that Southern became president and Farrell became a top executive when the two companies merged.

Southern is also listed as president of Enviromine, which makes products to help remediate environmental problems from mining.

The secretary of state filing for Enviromine lists an address for Southern in Marco Island, Fla.

Mike Murphy, an Enviromine employee, confirmed that Southern is still with the company but would not provide any more information.

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